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COMMUNITY VOICES

It's Time for Public Libraries to Get Creative

COMMUNITY VOICES

By Phil Shapiro, | APR 26, 2010 3:30 AM PDT

In the current recession, many public libraries are laying off staff, slashing budgets, and closing down. Library supporters respond by becoming more vocal, insistently demanding greater funding from legislators. You can't squeeze blood from a stone, though. It's not as if legislators don't care about libraries. There is no money to be allocated. The money isn't there, no matter how loud you shout.

A better use of time and energy is to get creative. We're on the verge of a second Renaissance that will make the first Renaissance appear half-hearted. Libraries and library supporters should be looking for ways to place their surf boards on the top of that digital wave — to ride it for all it's worth.

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How do you reach the top of that wave? You start using the library space as a collaborative space to make things: books, music CDs, instructional videotapes, screencasts, art, inventions, software, and so on. And then you start selling those creative things to fund the library's operations. You sell those creative products via [Amazon's Create Space](#), [Apple's iBookstore](#), [Lulu](#), and countless other Websites that have sprung up to empower creative producers.

Half of a library's operating budget could be generated by the creative output of the people who use that library. Writers, composers, filmmakers, choreographers, artists, inventors, and other creative types could all get their start working on collaborative projects for their own neighborhood library. Established creative talent could donate some of their works to add value to anthologies and other group projects.



Library staff would be hired based on their creative talents as well as their other competences. So a job offer for a library job might sound like this: "Mr. McCartney, I understand you like composing songs. We're thrilled to have you join our library staff. Ms. Dickinson, your poetry is truly distinctive, welcome to our library staff. Mr. da Vinci, your drawing talent will be a big asset to our library community. Mr. Wright, we're so happy to have someone interested in building flying machines join our staff."

Suppose your library wanted to start producing books for Apple's iBookstore. How would you and your library do that? A Web service named [Lulu has you covered.](#)

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Who would buy iBooks created by people in your library? Some of the purchasers would be people right in your neighborhood — and those neighbors' family and friends. And if your iBooks have literary or practical value, the books will be purchased by people outside of your state and outside of your country.

Libraries in the United States usually close early on Friday evenings. Friday evenings could become the time for creative projects to happen within the library space. From 7 pm to midnight, creative types could use the library space to plan and produce creative works. Some creative types might spend the entire night in the library, emerging Saturday morning for breakfast — tired, but with high-quality creative works in hand.

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Libraries themselves are not well-situated to handle the monies that come their way, but Friends of the Library groups are. If you care about supporting libraries, maybe the thing you need to do today is contact your local Friends of the Library group to see how your own creative talents might be put to use to support the library you care about.

Libraries also need to start forming alliances with hacker spaces. These are springing up all over the place, inspired by the pioneering hacker spaces in Germany. Remember the internal combustion engine? That came from Germany. Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Eastern Europe, Holland, Italy – all have some of the most creative minds on the planet. We would do well to watch, listen, and learn from them.

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If your library does not currently subscribe to [MAKE magazine](#), a question to ask is: Why not? What took us so long to understand the value of this publication?

Libraries are places that spark ideas. Can we use those sparked ideas as fuel to fund libraries? We can if we want to. And then the circle becomes complete. Libraries become oxygen to the collective mind, both fueling the collective mind and being fueled by it.

Should public libraries be [welcoming homes to ingenuity?](#)

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